

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE A-1

NEW YORK TIMES
10 MARCH 1982

Sandinist Says U.S. Seeks Pretext for Intervention

By WARREN HOGE

Special to The New York Times

MANAGUA, Nicaragua, March 9 — One of the members of the Nicaraguan junta said today that the military buildup here was "exclusively defensive" and that the United States was making charges to the contrary to justify a possible intervention.

The Sandinist official, Sergio Ramirez Mercado, conceded in an interview that the country had expanded its armed forces and that garrisons are more scattered than when Nicaragua was ruled by Anastasio Somoza Debayle, but he disputed charges from Washington that 2,000 Cuban soldiers were at the side of the Nicaraguan troops. "There is not a single foreign soldier in Nicaragua," he said.

Seeking Nonaggression Pact

"When Mr. Haig is saying everyday that they are going to bomb us and attack us and blockade us, how can they then turn around and ask us not to defend ourselves?" he asked.

Contrary to being a threat to other nations in the region, he argued, Nicaragua was seeking a "nonaggression pact" with all the countries of Central America. "We have stated this position openly many times," he said, "but nobody in the Reagan Administration wants to hear us." Mr. Ramirez was responding to an interviewer's questions that were based on a brief account of a State Department news conference in Washington that purported to demonstrate that Nicaragua was building up its military forces.

Mr. Ramirez called the charges "pure lies," saying, "What worries us is that they could be a pretext for some kind of thing they have in mind."

He spread his arms wide. "They say they have many options open," he said. "I'm just reporting what they say."

Mr. Ramirez, one of the two original members of the junta that has been managing Nicaragua since the overthrow of Mr. Somoza in July 1979, was interviewed in his Government House office hung with sepia photographs of Augusto César Sandino, namesake of the revolution, and photographs of guerrillas on the attack. He said he had not been informed of today's briefing in Washington until this correspondent told him of it.

"We have more military garrisons of course," he said on hearing the charges. "But it is precisely because the spread of Mr. Somoza's national guard was not based on national defense but on internal repression. He didn't want to have any of his military units out of his reach in Managua because he feared that independent garrisons would revolt. He centered the military here in the bunker with his armored cars, tanks and elite forces all in one place in Managua."

"Our military organization," he continued, "has to do with the need to defend ourselves. We don't fear any upheaval among the troops. We have spread out our garrisons the way any regular military force in the world does."

Deny U.S. Troop Figures

Mr. Ramirez said the Sandinists never discuss the exact size of their forces but that the Administration's estimate of 70,000 today was "too much."

He said that they were building no new airstrips but that they were expanding two existing ones in the Caribbean coastal cities of Puerto Cabezas and Bluefields. "We are doing both based on money borrowed from the Central American Development Bank in Honduras," he said. "These loans were negotiated during the Somoza regime, and we are only continuing them."

He said he considered the Administration's claim that there were 2,000 Cuban soldiers here "absolutely absurd."

"How could we hide 2,000 Cuban soldiers in a country this size without anybody seeing them?" he asked.

He claimed there were 2,000 teachers and 400 doctors from Cuba still in Nicaragua. Until recently, he said, Cuban technicians and engineers were helping build a road from the provincial city of Matagalpa to mining areas near the Caribbean coast but now "the work is finished."

Mr. Ramirez and other members of the Sandinist-ruled Government say their fears of an American-sponsored intervention in or "destabilization" of Nicaragua are compounded by indications that Salvadoran guerrillas are mounting a serious effort to disrupt the elections scheduled there March 28.

"We feel if the guerrillas are successful, it will be quite a difficult situation for us," he said.

"The United States has made of the Salvadoran elections a crucial thing," he said. "They are putting all their eggs in one basket. The failure of the elec-

tions would be a political failure for the United States, and we're afraid they'll pass us the bill for it."

Asked if the Sandinists had gone so far as to ask the Salvadoran rebels to avoid sabotaging the elections, he replied that the Sandinists would have "no right" to do so and "no influence" over the insurgents in that country.

Fears U.S. May Organize Exiles

He said he felt a direct American intervention was "improbable," but the Sandinists were afraid the United States would help organize a force of Cuban exiles and the 5,000 to 6,000 former national guardsmen he estimated had fled Nicaragua after the revolution.

He disputed American charges that Nicaragua is shipping arms to the Salvadoran rebels and challenged the United States to produce evidence. He said that Nicaragua had proposed joint surveillance of its border with Honduras, but the offer had not been accepted.

Nicaragua has no border with El Salvador, but it faces El Salvador across the Gulf of Fonseca. United States destroyers have recently been patrolling there. "I think the warships that the United States has stationed in the Gulf of Fonseca have all the information to say whether or not we are shipping arms through it," he said. "Why don't they say what they found?"